

BUDGET 2026-27

**ENGAGEMENT
REPORT**

MAY 2026

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Executive Summary

ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW

This year Council agreed to redesign its approach by introducing community input earlier in the budget process. This approach enabled deeper, more informed input from the community during the development of the budget - ensuring community priorities were considered earlier and more meaningfully.

The purpose of this engagement initiative was to gather community sentiment on the financial levers available to Council, as outlined in the Long-Term Financial Plan:

- Making council more efficient
- Optimise current and explore new revenue opportunities
- Review and rationalise property and assets
- Review service offerings
- Strategic and sustainable design of capital program

Community members could participate in the engagement process via an online survey or face-to-face by speaking to Councillors and Officers at 'Councillor Listening Posts' across the municipality conducted between February and March 2026.

Participation opportunities were promoted through social media, media releases, local newspapers, and radio.

Community members had the opportunity to propose new project ideas through "Community Submissions" for potential inclusion in the budget.

A further opportunity for engagement was available through participating in a community panel, for which a separate report is available on the Budget 2026/27 Have Your Say Page (Council Budget 2026/27 Community Panel Insights report).

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

The community was asked in the survey to provide their preferences on options that described how the financial levers may be operationalised. There were eleven questions asked covering different aspects of the five financial levers (as detailed in the engagement overview).

The community's feedback showed:

- A stronger preference for five of the options
 - Council should reuse or sell underused buildings or land to reduce maintenance costs and free up money
 - Council should review levels of service (such as how often services are provided and opening hours) to better match community priorities
 - Council should consider doing major projects more gradually, or at a later time, to make sure we can afford them and stay financially sustainable in the future
 - Council should invest in better technology and ways of working (such as online services and automation) to reduce costs over time
 - Council should build brand new facilities in new suburbs and upgrade and expand existing facilities in established suburbs
- There was a low level of support for 'Council should build brand new facilities over upgrading and expanding current facilities in established suburbs'

NEXT STEPS

The engagement findings will inform the development of the Budget 2026-27.

Council will vote on the Budget 2026-27 at the 23 June 2026 Council meeting.

Introduction

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the findings from the online and face-to-face community engagement activities conducted between February and March 2026 as part of the Budget 2026-27 engagement process. This report does not cover the outcomes of the community panel engagement, which will be presented in a separate report (Council Budget 2026/27 Community Panel Insights report).

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In Victoria, Councils are required under the *Local Government Act 2020* to prepare and adopt a budget for each financial year and the subsequent three financial years. The budget must include: compliant financial statements; an overview of the services and initiatives it will fund; the Council Plan priority initiatives to be delivered in each financial year; the required service performance indicators and measures for funded services; and the total amount the Council intends to raise through rates and charges.

ENGAGEMENT PURPOSE

The purpose of this engagement initiative was to gather community sentiment on the financial levers available to Council, as outlined in the Long-Term Financial Plan:

- Making council more efficient
- Optimise current and explore new revenue opportunities
- Review and rationalise property and assets
- Review service offerings
- Strategic and sustainable design of capital program

Results will be used to inform the deliberations of Council during the development of the Budget 2026-27.

How we engaged

The community was invited to provide feedback via an online platform or face-to-face drop in sessions between 16 February and 28 March 2026. Participation was promoted through the following channels:

- Social media posts
- Email to subscribers to the City's online engagement platform, Have Your Say (HYS)
- Media releases
- Articles in local newspapers
- Adverts on local radio

HAVE YOUR SAY ONLINE PLATFORM

The primary method of engagement was the City's HYS online platform, through which feedback was collected via a 10-minute survey or community submission form.

Survey

The survey sought to understand community sentiment on:

- Support for example actions that would help to deliver on the financial levers available to Council :
 - Making Council More Efficient
 - Optimise Current and Explore New Revenue Opportunities
 - Review and Rationalise Property and Assets
 - Review Service Offerings
 - Strategic and Sustainable Design of Capital Program
- The perceived impact on the community if those actions were implemented

Community submissions

The community were able to submit ideas for new projects via a community submission form to be considered during the budget process.

COUNCILLOR LISTENING POSTS

In addition, 11 'listening posts' were held across the municipality to facilitate face-to-face conversations between community members and Councillors. These conversations were open to discuss any topic the community wanted to discuss with Councillors.

Locations included:

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| • Geelong West Town Hall | • Lara Market |
| • Portarlington Market | • Leopold Library |
| • Ocean Grove Reserve Market | • Newcomb Library |
| • Leisurelink Aquatic and Recreation Centre | • City Market |
| • Corio Village Shopping Centre | • Belmont Library |
| | • Highton Village |

Who we engaged

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 93 responses to the survey were received. Of these respondents:

- 46 identified as women
- 40 identified as men
- 1 identified as non-binary
- 5 did not specify their gender
- 1 person skipped this question

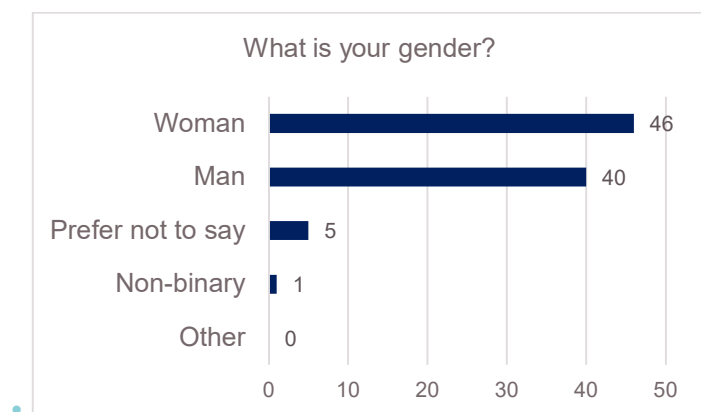


Figure 1 – Breakdown of survey respondents' gender

The largest proportion of survey responses came from those aged 35-49 years (30) and 60-69 years (19):

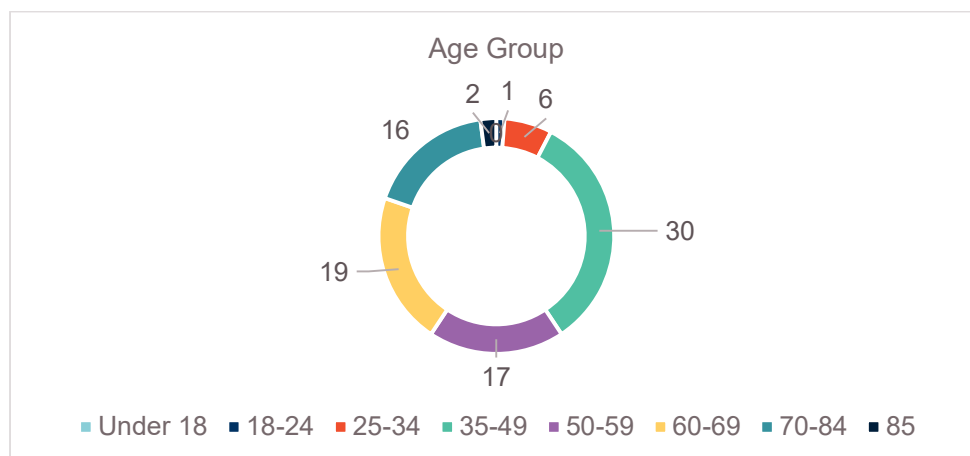


Figure 2 - Breakdown of survey participation by age

The following provides a detailed breakdown of survey participation by identified groups, with the highest proportion being Parent/Guardian (34)

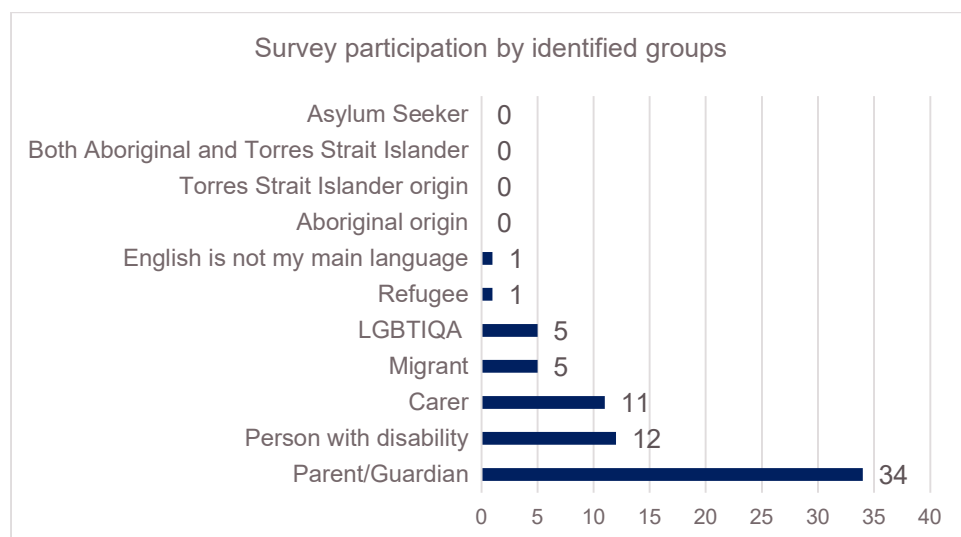


Figure 3 - Breakdown of survey participation by identified groups

What we heard

KEY FINDINGS OVERVIEW

SURVEY FINDINGS

Participants were asked to:

- rate their level of support for the action on a scale of 0-10, where 10 indicated very strong support
- assess the potential impact of that action on the community, using the same 0-10 scale, where 10 indicated a high level of impact.

The figures below show the average rating of all respondents for the support and impact across the actions.

Statement	Support	Impact
Council should reuse or sell under used buildings or land to reduce maintenance costs and free up money	6.97	5.91
Council should review levels of service (such as how often services are provided and opening hours) to better match community priorities	6.87	6.54
Council should consider doing major projects more gradually, or at a later time, to make sure we can afford them and stay financially sustainable in the future	6.66	6.41
Should Council invest in better technology and ways of working (such as online services and automation) to reduce costs over time?	6.43	7.20
Council should build brand new facilities in new suburbs and upgrade and expand existing facilities in established suburbs	6.36	6.58
Council should focus on fewer sites and maintain them to a higher standard	5.74	6.39
Council should stop or reduce some programs	5.47	6.03
Council should have external providers deliver parts of a service to reduce costs, while keeping service quality	4.87	6.40
Council should increase fees people pay for services so they better cover the cost of providing them	4.51	6.71
Council should keep more sites but maintain them at a basic level	4.25	6.03
Council should build brand new facilities over upgrading and expanding current facilities in established suburbs	2.96	6.05

Table 1 – Table of financial actions and engagement outcomes

LISTENING POST FINDINGS

Location	Conversations	Key Themes
Geelong West Town Hall	18	Ward information, Footpath Network, Community Panel
Portarlington Market	36	Dogs - signage ambiguous, Market Sq, Footpath, road surface/dust
Ocean Grove Reserve Market	18	Footpaths, Creche closures
Leisurelink Aquatic and Recreation Centre	30	Creche closures, Public Transport, Footpaths, Bike Lanes, Dumped Rubbish, Budget
Corio Village Shopping Centre	25	Cash pay parking, Road quality, Hospital parking, face-to-face customer service
Lara Market	35	Drainage, weed management, building approval times, Kevin Hoffman walk
Leopold Library	4	Request for Service (RFS) requests
Newcomb Library	5	Aged care
City Market	16	Market Square, Inner City safety - Inner City cleanliness, Bust station, Public Transport, High praise for City Market
Belmont Library	5	RFS requests
Highton Village	30	Traffic, Nicholson Court, ½ basketball court added to his court, Kardinia Pool Early Morning Opening Hours, bus shelters, Bollards, playgrounds, speed signs
	176	

Table 2 – Listening post conversations and key themes

COMMUNITY SUBMISSIONS

There were 30 community submissions received. These submissions, along with the 98 submissions received during the 2025/26 budget cycle, will be considered by Council during the development of the 2026/27 budget.

Next steps

The findings from this engagement, along with the outcomes of the Community Panel, inform the development of the Budget 2026-27, and Council's deliberations.

Council will vote on whether to endorse the Budget at the 23 June 2026 Council meeting.

What people said

The quotes below are drawn from responses to an open-ended survey question inviting additional comments. Quotes are grouped by financial lever; however, each lever comprised multiple questions used to gauge community opinion.

Section 1 – Optimise Current and Explore New Revenue Opportunities

Topics included: Funding Priorities and Ratepayer Value, Program Funding and Accessibility, Fee Structure and Usage Reflection, and Financial Management and Efficiency.

Quotes from select survey responses:

- "The principal funding source should remain rates and outgoings trimmed to match."
- "With interest rates going up, increasing fees for services may be the difference between a child having swimming lessons or not."
- "Fee for services can disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged. The value of many programs social inclusion and the long-term benefits are far outweighed by the costs, although this would require a large study scope to fully appreciate"
- "Fees - structure to reflect usage e.g. BAC fees are set for profit or community groups which is fair but needs an additional structure that reflects casual/regular hiring."
- "Increasing fees in this economic climate won't be well received by anyone even if it's minor. The solution would be to make the existing structure more efficient before relying on the community to fund the deficit"
- "Councils should ensure all services provided to the community reflect the true cost of the service."
- "Some services should be user-pays but need to consider community benefit and rates paid by homeowners."
- "Obviously in a cost-of-living crisis, one that won't be resolved in the near future, any increase in fees and decrease in services is detrimental to people as it adds extra pressure to people who may not be able to manage it."

Section 2 – Making Council More Efficient

Topics included: Streamlining Processes and Improving Efficiency, Balancing Technology and Human Interaction, Enhancing Digital Services and Website Functionality, Cost Reduction and Value for Money, Collaboration and Shared Systems, Accessibility and Communication Challenges, Investment in Basic Infrastructure and Services.

Quotes from select survey responses:

- "Council should absolutely review efficiency and effectiveness in its ways of working - and explore collaborative procurement opportunities with other councils regarding systems and processes to reduce costs and streamline services across the region."
- "Council workflow and roles inside the organisation needs to be improved. I've asked questions and been bumped around for months. getting different people answering the question in different ways."
- "Remove inefficiencies"
- "Improving efficiency is not about cutting corners, it's about delivering better outcomes for the community. When services are streamlined and resources are used wisely, residents experience faster responses, clearer processes, and more reliable support."
- "Streamlining back of house functions should be a priority but not at the cost personal interaction with residents. Many older residents are still not comfortable with technology and just won't engage if they can't call or visit"

- "There is already too much automation, which creates frustration and difficulty for older people."
"Invest in better technology, but don't reinvent the wheel (like the Myki saga). The technology likely exists and is being used effectively and efficiently elsewhere."
- "It is already almost impossible to speak directly with personnel in some areas of responsibility where staff appear prepared to 'hide' behind the person answering calls."

Section 3 – Review and Rationalise Property and Assets

Topics included: Impact of Reducing Sites and Services, Selling Surplus Assets, Maintenance Standards and Investment, Importance of Accessibility and Proximity, Strategic Planning for a Growing Population, Prioritising Quality and Community Needs.

Quotes from select survey responses:

- "Reducing sites over such a large council area will probably see those who need them most miss out"
- "The City of Greater Geelong is geographically large in size and heavily reliant on car use. Having fewer facilities would increase access issues for those who don't have access to a car or frequent and efficient public transport."
- "Sell surplus assets into private hands and let developers improve the general amenity. Too many buildings and too hard and too expensive to maintain."
- "Selling off assets for a short-term cash injection and a lower maintenance bill will not serve the community and will potentially impoverish their experience with Council."
- "Selling land and buildings should absolutely happen but should be limited to facilities that don't align with core functions of council. Other facilities including parks should be within easy walking distance of all residents and delivered to a reasonable standard."
- "Quality over quantity. Council should be driving what's essential and what isn't delivering ROI and make decisions accordingly"

Section 4 – Review Service Offerings

Topics included: Cost-effectiveness of outsourcing, Service quality and accountability, Loss of local knowledge and community connection, Transparency and oversight, Impact on local employment, Suitability of services for outsourcing.

Quotes from select survey responses:

- "Outsourcing increases costs and lowers quality."
- "Difficult to see outsourcing services as cost effective - given that the service provider needs to cover the costs of labour and materials whilst still making a profit - outsourcing is inefficient."
- "Outsourced services must meet community needs and quality plus affordability"
- "Outsourcing often shifts the focus from community service to cost-driven decision-making, and in my experience, this leads to reduced quality, less accountability, and weaker connection to local needs."
- "Council should ensure that they are not paying exorbitant fees for external consultants to review services, as well as ensuring they are openly consulting (not consulting to get the answers they already want)."
- "It created and/or maintains jobs within the community (on the proviso) that the outsourced businesses that are engaged are Geelong based, if not than should be a priority."
- "Also, by outsourcing those jobs that aren't council's key strengths or focuses, allows for the time to be freed up and focused in on what council can do best"

Section 5 – Strategic and Sustainable Design of Capital Program

Topics included: Prioritising Existing Facilities, Financial Prudence and Transparency, Sustainability and Long-Term Planning, Equitable Infrastructure and Facility Standards, Developer Contributions and New Suburbs, Prioritisation of Sports Facilities, Redundant or Ineffective Projects.

Quotes from select survey responses:

- "Where possible, existing facilities should be maintained and improved, and state govt funding sought to reduce the cost of new facilities."
- "I think established suburbs get forgotten about too often. A suburb may have a pool, tennis court, community hall and sporting oval to serve the community, however often the facilities are decades old and feel run down and tired."
- "It's important to keep a standard across suburbs. All residents should have the same access to safe and enjoyable infrastructure such as parks, sporting fields, community houses etc."
- "Existing communities are being left behind more and more. The libraries that service disadvantaged areas such as Newcomb and Corio are woeful yet huge amounts of money was spent on the ridiculously fancy new Armstrong creek and Drysdale libraries."
- "Fixing existing suburbs infrastructure needs prioritisation as these are lagging in basic standards. Such as need for footpaths, mended gutters, bus shelters, connecting bike paths, developed public space as parks and fit for purpose areas. Support for tourism. Otherwise, it creates inequality of liveability in the community."
- "Council needs to have a clear way of prioritising projects."
- "Capital project selection and expenditure should be more transparent."
- "The use of capital funds should be implemented when the funds are available. Some projects will need to postpone to ensure the burden of funding the project is limited."

Community Submissions

Below are the community submissions to be considered as part of the Budget 2026-27 development process:

- Request for retention of the leisure centre creche and occasional care services
- Request for funding for Music at the Basilica - free access for students to all events
- Request for funding Arts Trails across region
- Support for a dedicated local artist's space in Geelong Gallery
- Installation of EV charging hub in East Geelong (Ormond Road, Garden St and Myers St) shopping strip
- Request for funding to upgrade carpark facilities at Highton Reserve
- Reinstatement of tip vouchers to mitigate illegal rubbish dumping on council land
- Request for bike lanes in Queens Park Rd and Aphrasia St
- Request for facility upgrades at Len Trevin Reserve and Charles McCarthy Reserve St Leonards
- Request for a pedestrian safety barrier on Shannon Avenue Bridge
- Request for the Newcombe Street playground in Portarlington to be fully fenced for safety.
- Funding to complete the Grinter Reserve Facility Development Plan (Pavilion)
- Request to review and update the St Leonards Reserve Master Plan (completed in 2022)
- Funding to complete the Lara Principal Bicycle Network project
- Funding for redevelopment of St Leonards Bellarine Sharks Clubrooms
- Fund community space on land at Provence and Esperence for Coffee Van
- Funding for wombat crossings on Bellarine Rail Trail road crossings
- Funding for Community Education Session on Weed and Erosion Management
- Request for Improvements to Kanooka Drive Playground
- Funding for pedestrian crossings Mathews Road and Cox Road - near roundabout
- Request funding for a Heritage Study to enable Stage 1 of the Kyema/Lipson drainage project.
- Request funding for road upgrade of Como Road Leopold
- Multi Year funding FY27 and beyond for delivery of Myers Reserve Masterplan infrastructure upgrade
- Request for funding for pedestrian safety and traffic calming upgrades in Garden St precinct
- Request funding for traffic management solutions near Leopold Primary School (Kensington Road)
- Request for expenditure restraint and budget reform including rate capping below Government levy
- Request for recurrent funding of \$140,000 for North Geelong Warriors to offset ground maintenance and operational cost pressures.
- Request for funding to increase basketball courts at BASC
- Request for funding a cycling path link - Ocean Grove to Barwon Heads (Improve Safety)
- Request for funding to complete the upgrade of Sandy Creek Road Lara

Community submissions from the Budget 2025-26 development process, which will also be considered in the development of the Budget 2026-27, are listed below:

- Belmont Cycling Track Lighting & 24/7 Safe Access Initiative
- Construction of a Primary School Drop off zone - Barwon Heads Primary School
- Drainage improvements - Montgomery Ave Hamlyn Heights
- Footpaths - Foreshore Clifton Springs (The Dell)
- Funding for Footpath - Golf Links Rd to Stephens Parade Barwon Heads

- Funding for Footpath - Melaluka Rd Leopold - Highway to bus stop
- Funding to complete the DeMotts Road upgrade
- Investment in a Bellarine link to improve traffic flow
- Kyema-Lipson Drainage Upgrade Phase 2
- Laneway (Bituminise) upgrade - Drumcondra
- Ocean Grove - Bellarine Rail Trail - Safe Cycling Link
- Road Infrastructure - funding for upgrade between Drysdale and Portarlington
- St Augustines Park South Valley Road Highton - Revitalisation
- St Leonards - Closure of Ibbotson St to create Greenway
- Construction of Goal Safety Netting at East Geelong Football and Netball Club (Western End)
- Ervin Reserve - Facility & Lighting Upgrades
- Funding for 2nd Netball Court - North Geelong Football Netball Club
- Funding for a Spectator/Player Shelter at Grinter Reserve - Oval 2
- Funding for the upgrade of Eastern Park Bowls Club - Clubhouse upgrade including toilets
- Funding to build and All Abilities Toilet at Harvey Park St Leonards
- Funding to complete upgrade of nets, pitches and clubroom at Newcombe Cricket Club
- Geelong BMX - Pavillion Development Grinter Reserve
- Howard Glover Reserve - Infrastructure Upgrades
- Moolap Reserve - Funding to resurface Tennis Courts
- Moolap Reserve - Funding to upgrade and repurpose Netball Courts for Pickleball
- Moolap Reserve - Upgrade to lighting infrastructure - courts 3,4,5 & 6
- Mt Duneed - Tennis court infrastructure and High School for residents
- North Bellarine Aquatic - Opex funding for Winter Season
- St Albans Reserve - Netball Facilities Upgrade
- Tanner St Reserve - Cricket pitch replacement & upgrade
- Thomson Football Netball Club - Sports Lighting Upgrade
- Friends of Buckley Falls - reinstatement of recurrent funding
- Geelong West-Hamlyn Heights Secure Dog Play Space Initiative
- Increased availability for community use of Civic Space - Wurriki Nyal
- Refurbishment of Superintendents Residence - Eastern Park
- Replacement Rotunda in Central Drysdale
- Shorts Place South Upgrade - Paving
- Addition of Bike Lanes in High Street Belmont and Barrabool Road Highton
- Funding for Ryrie Street - Streetscape Upgrades - tree lighting
- Funding for additional public streetlighting
- Funding for community Sustainability Initiatives
- Nature strip makeover competition
- Urban Forest & Climate Resilience Initiative
- Develop a Central Transport Hub for Corio to improve connectivity and reduce travel times.
- Investment in Cunningham Pier Revitalisation to increase tourism
- Topgolf-Style Driving Range Proposal for Balliang Par 3
- Disability Access - Geelong All-Abilities Sports Club - Breakwater Oval
- Funding for LGBTQIA+ Action Plan Implementation
- Funding to implement a program of Youth activities at night in Geelong
- NDIS support for travel to Geelong
- Norlane West Scout Group - Funding for a new Scout Hall
- Northern Bay College - Funding for Fit Club initiative - Sport & Nutrition Coaching
- Recurrent funding for Reconciliation in the Park event
- Royal Geelong Yacht Club - Funding for Social Impact Program

- Arts & Culture - Additional Grant Funds for UNESCO Design Week events for community groups
- Geelong Gallery expansion to City Hall
- Funding for a Community Place Based Needs Study - Ocean Grove
- Funding for a Masterplan at St Albans Football Netball Club facilities to upgrade netball courts, seating and facilities
- Funding to develop a Tree Register for Greater Geelong
- Moolap Reserve - Pavillion Design Stage 2
- Mt Braddon Masterplan Implementation
- Portarlington Football and Netball Club - Reinstatement of funding to complete Master Plan
- Rating - Delete Commercial Differential from rating system for CBD properties
- Rating - Rate ceiling
- Request for additional funding to complete roads maintenance and upgrades
- Request for allocation of infrastructure funding for footpaths in Reigate Road Highton
- Request for funding to complete the Kyema-Lipson Drainage Project
- Request for increased funding allocation for Footpath Infrastructure in St Albans Park
- Request for increased funding investment for Drainage Infrastructure upgrades in Geelong West
- Funding for facility lighting at tennis courts in Geelong
- Request for funding for 2nd Netball Court Osborne Park Nth Geelong
- Request for funding for Breakwater Oval upgrades
- Request for funding for Leopold Cricket Club Facility Upgrades
- Request for funding for Moolap Tennis Club Facility Upgrades
- Request for funding for the Drysdale Railway Station Public Toilets Upgrade
- Request for funding to complete Lara Sporting Club Facility Upgrades
- Request for funding for outdoor recreation spaces in Lara
- Request for funding public realm upgrades in Highton and Geelong West
- Request for funding to complete the Moorpanyal Park redevelopment
- Request for funding to completed active and safe transport networks in Barwon Heads / Ocean Grove
- Request for investment in infrastructure projects in Geelong's Northern Suburbs
- Request for funding for tree management and tree canopy protection
- Request for increased Grant and Partnership Funding for Environment & Climate Action Initiatives
- Request for funding for a Business Growth Program
- Request for funding for the Norlane Community Centre Redevelopment
- Request for funding to build the Curlewis Community Health Hub
- Request for increased Funding for Neighbourhood Houses
- Request for recurrent funding of \$250k per annum for Hope Bereavement Care
- Request for increased investment into Performing Arts & Community Theatre in Geelong
- Request for funding a Business Case for Additional basketball courts at Bellarine Aquatic and Sports Centre (BASC)
- Request for funding to develop a Business Case for a Regional Football Facility
- Request to reinstate funding to complete the Portarlington Recreation Reserve Masterplan
- Advocacy for increased capital investment in road sealing
- Feedback and support for Community Grants and Partnerships and Waste Management projects in the FY26 budget
- Feedback on proposed increases to Commercial Rates
- Feedback on valuation of land and Farm Rating
- General feedback on the proposed budget publication; cost of living pressures, cuts to community services and roads infrastructure
- Request for reinstatement of Committee for Geelong membership funding